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The Kurds of Iraq. II

by Squadron-Leader J. C. A. JOHNSON

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In the second of his two articles on the Kurds, Squadron-Leader Johnson explains how pressure of circumstance is forcing these essentially nomadic people to abandon their wandering life and adjust themselves to a world in which only those whose habits do not bring them into conflict with the machinery of constitutional government can prosper. He also explains his reasons for thinking that the Kurds are by nature qualified, in favourable circumstances, to exercise increasing influence on the progress of the young Iraqi state

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132 221 We have already seen that the Kurds are essentially shepherds of the mountains. In the latitude where they live—approximately that of Greece—winter at sea-level may be mild, while in the mountains it is harsh. The cool summer breezes and green meadows of the higher mountains turn to snow, avalanche, and the rigours of a highland winter. So to save his flocks the Kurdish shepherd long ago became nomadic, making annual treks to the warmer valleys in the lower hills to obtain 221 winter grazing. The nomadic life, however, provides but a limited diet and the desire to supplement it by agriculture is a

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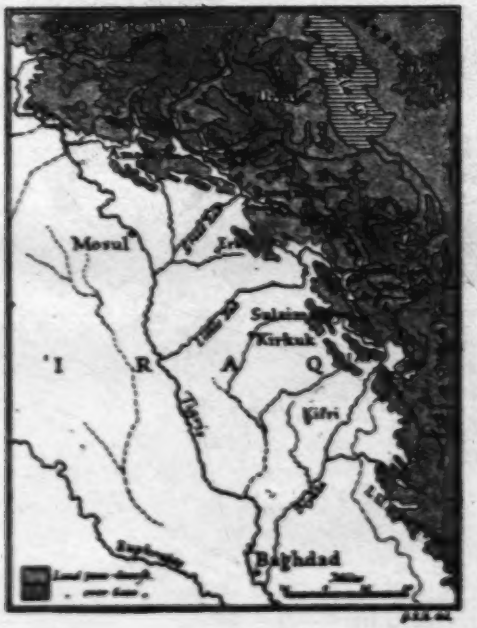

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221/ natural one. The Kurdish shepherd moves through lands where cereals and vegetables can be grown: barley, wheat, maize, rice, melons and tomatoes are among the crops cultivated in various parts; so the tendency is for the nomad to become semi-nomadic.

This is the term applied to tribes which have built villages in the lower ground into which they retire with their flocks and herds during the severity of the winter. The live-stock are normally crowded into a semi-basement below the living quarters. In the spring, when the grazing near at hand is used up, a portion of the tribe takes the flocks to the highlands, living in the usual black tents of the nomads, while certain members of each tribe remain in the village attending to the crops. Some tribes vacate their villages completely. The family goods and chattels are loaded onto the backs of oxen, donkeys or mules, and nothing is left behind except the four stone walls and mud roofs of the houses.

221/178 A number of Kurdish tribes in Iraq, however, are still entirely nomadic; these include various sections of the Jaf, Herki and other tribes. At the other end of the scale are the 'settled' Kurds, who live in villages in one locality throughout the year. Settled Kurds already outnumber the nomadic Kurds of Iraq, and for several reasons the tendency is for their numbers to increase further.

The first and most important is that in the case of most of the nomadic tribes the mountains of Iraq have been their winter habitat in the past, while for summer grazing they used the fertile slopes of the

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An increasing majority of the Kurds are now 'settled', but sections of some tribes, among them the Jaf, are still entirely nomadic. A powerful chief of the Jaf with ten of his sons

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178 higher mountains over the Turkish or Iranian border. With the spread of bureaucratic administration in these countries—especially in Iran—the frontiers have been closed to the passage of nomadic tribes by the imposition of taxes and conditions with which the tribesman cannot economically comply; so he has perforce to give up his summer highlands. Instead he has to use the border districts of Iraq which he formerly passed through in the spring and autumn. But here again the Iraq government policy is to settle the tribes where possible, owing to the difficulty of effective administrative control over nomads and the difficulty of bringing them within the influence of the government's educational and social policies.

000 The 'settling of the tribes' is distasteful to anyone who has lived among them and learned to appreciate the healthy care-free

[51B]

000 life of the nomad, the glamour of carrying one's home on one's back, and shooting a way through enemy bands who attempt to bar one's progress.

But there is another side to the question; for the constitutional governments of today have sounded the death-knell of the nomad. Even if allowed to continue leading his own life in his own way the nomad will eventually be ousted by the settled inhabitant. The latter lives in comfortable surroundings and comparative security. He can adapt himself to education, and the purchase and development of land, while the nomad's energies are used up almost entirely in movement and physical labour.

Thus the day comes when the nomad finds himself without grazing because the settled inhabitant has bought the land formerly unclaimed in court of law, and without education with which to fight for

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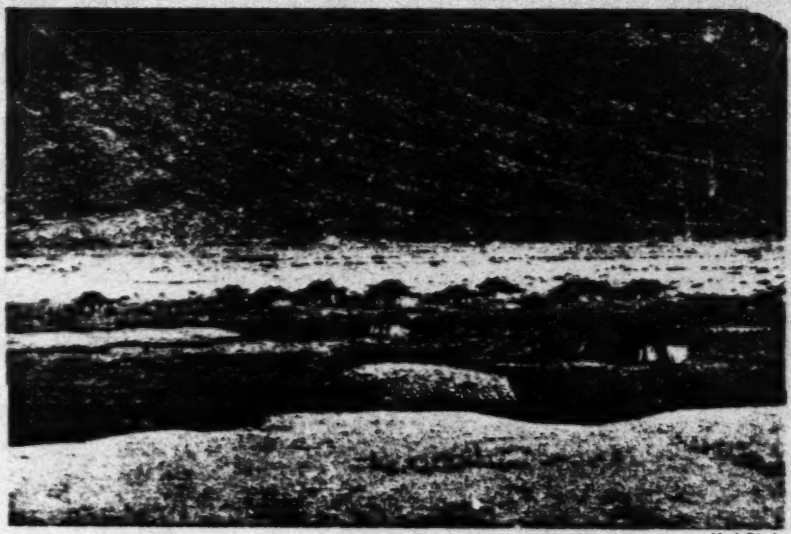

Mark Dineley

Encampment of nomad Kurds, who, owing partly to new frontier regulations which bar the way to their old summer grazing grounds in Iran, are being gradually forced to abandon their wandering life

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Nomads live in tents of black woven goat-hair with bamboo walls—surrounded by domestic animals

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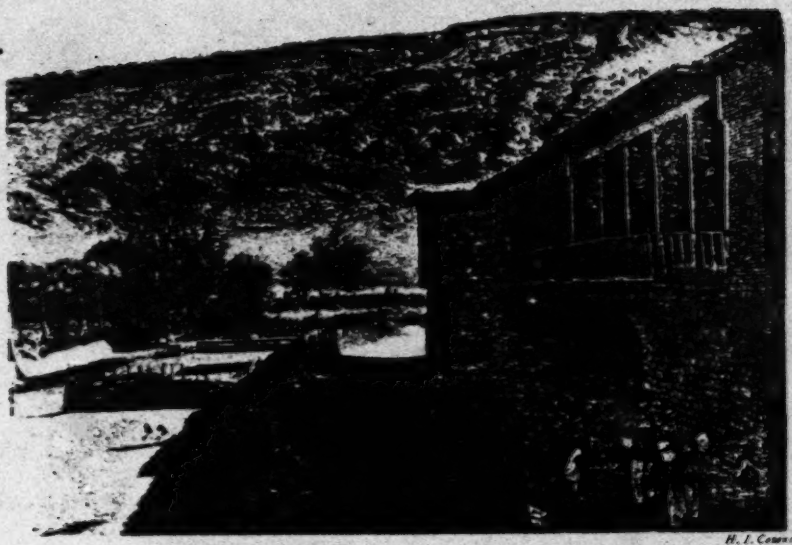

H. I. Count

Farmhouse recently built by a rich 'settled' Kurd, who, contrary to the law which forbids fortifications, added a bastion. In the distance goats and sheep are being herded for dipping

000 his land and water rights; finally, when the powers of government decree that the pen must replace the rifle in obtaining one's rights, and moreover are in a position to enforce this decree with armed police backed by machine-guns and aircraft, the nomad finds himself paying exorbitant taxes to anyone on whose land he wishes to graze.

So his great flocks and swift horses decrease in numbers, that adventurous spirit is dimmed which formerly carried him forward annually to explore the blue distance beyond the next range, and he becomes a penniless vagrant. The process of evolution pushes ever onwards the wave we call civilization, carrying man and his environment with it. Those who cannot, or will not, go forward on the crest of the wave are left behind and drowned in the sea of the past.

181 Whatever may be the longings of the educated Kurd, the ordinary villager—who is equivalent to that well-known

131 personality in England, the 'man in the street'—worries little about such things. Provided he has enough money to buy his tea and sugar, enough land to cultivate his cereals, and possibly a few goats or sheep, he is content.

[844] The Kurd is born into a world of dancing and feasting, for relatives and [857] friends celebrate his birth for three whole days and nights. As soon as he grows old enough to stand he toddles about the flat roof of his house, occasionally throwing stones over the edge at his brothers be- [852] neath. When he reaches the age of five he [292] is given clothes exactly like those of his father—in miniature. He is a proud lad when he puts on his first pair of baggy trousers, a thick, quilted jacket, and several yards of coloured cloth wound round his waist, more silken squares tied round his head, and a yard or more of excess shirt-sleeve which he winds back over his cuff.

852 He has another great festival when he is
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[text continues on p. 54B]

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The Kurd is born into a world of feasting and dancing: to the music of pipe and drum Kurdish women will dance the reshbelek, *at a circumcision festival, for hours on end*

[54A]

852 circumcised at about the age of seven.
304 Once more the relatives and friends gather, sweetmeats are produced, and there are two days of preliminary feasting and music to dim the pain of the operation. On the third day, when the operation is
[535] performed, the *reshbelek* (national dance) is danced, in which men and women stand arm in arm in a row swaying backwards and forwards while music and singing fill the night with sound.

583 The next great event in the life of the young Kurd is his marriage. When he reaches about eighteen years of age, or earlier among the tribes, he takes a wife. Among the poorer people a girl of one family is exchanged for a girl of another family, and a double marriage takes place; or if one girl is too young, she is set aside as the *dasgiyran* or fiancée of the boy until old enough to be married (that is, about 14 years old in the case of women). So for a poor family the only expense incurred is three days of feasting and the

583 price of cooking-pots, blanket and a carpet with which to set up the new household. The total cost of a poor man's wedding is between five and ten pounds sterling.

Among the richer families a girl may be bought instead of exchanged. The price may be anything, depending on the beauty of the girl and the willingness of the family to part with her (that is, on their ability to argue well). The wedding feast of a rich *agha* (chieftain) may involve feeding a thousand guests for a period of ten days.

462 In the nomadic tribe, however, the situation is rather different. The women
583 of the tribe do all the work while the men sit about talking and sleeping. By night they rarely sleep, as they sit around with their rifles ready to guard the box of money and valuables kept in the tent. Therefore the beauty of a young girl taken in marriage is a secondary consideration in determining her price. The nomad is rich in live-stock, if not in cash, and the cost of a girl may vary between

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Springtime exodus of a semi-nomadic tribe and its flocks up the Rowanduz Road, constructed under British supervision in 1927, to higher summer grazing grounds. Cows serve as pack animals

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Encampment of tents occupied by semi-nomads while away from their villages with flocks in summer

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Minor chiefs of the Jaf descended from Adela Khanum, who ruled over the tribe as she delights of its prosperity and is reputed to have rivalled Queen Elizabeth in wisdom

462 about forty and one hundred pounds.
583 Her value will depend on her utility—her physical strength for manual labour, and her ability to make carpets, rugs, clothes and other things.

562 Contrary to the practice in most Mohammedan countries the Kurdish woman goes about openly and unveiled. She carries herself with a quiet dignity rivalling that of her menfolk. Although women are still regarded as chattels, the women in a Kurdish family have an appreciable influence over their spouses. The symbol of triumphant womanhood in Kurdistan was the famous Adela Khanum, who on the death of her husband took over the reins of chieftainship of the Jaf tribe when it was at the height of its wealth and power. She ruled it with a wisdom and firmness rivalling that of Queen Elizabeth.

177 When education in a foreign tongue, 'European' clothes, and rattling typewriters are forced upon the Kurd by the threat of rattling machine-guns in the way

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177 of the modern East, he displays a lack of enthusiasm which his more 'progressive' neighbours cannot understand, and he is classed as bovine and wooden-headed. On the other hand, if allowed to develop quietly in his own way, he readily adapts himself to the new world springing up around him.

439 177 With the coming of the government, motor roads, and organised forces to keep the peace in the country, trade has begun to improve in Kurdistan. When it no longer pays to raid, the Kurds take to trade—being traders by nature like the Scots. Foreign 'luxuries', such as the new coloured cloths, tea, and sugar, have quickly become necessities even in the remotest districts, and to obtain the wherewithal to purchase them the Kurd is compelled to cultivate for sale as well as for food.

439 661 Now that caravans can come to the towns without hindrance from those through whose territory they pass, instead

[text continues on p. 58A]

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[illegible] in the Amudiya River, one of the villages in which the environmentally [illegible] live, and [illegible] in contact with the [illegible]. [illegible] villagers remain in [illegible] the right

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[illegible] Arabs, showing how [illegible] are then [illegible] whilst [illegible] by grazing sheep

of having a large proportion of their merchandise removed forcibly (as was the case in Turkish times) by the garrisons of soldiers, gendarmes, police and corrupt officials, the villagers returns safely to his village with the indispensable tea and sugar bought in exchange for his loads of tobacco or firewood cut from the hillside.

Great changes have been brought about in economic conditions by the improvement of communications and security, but the development of the country has barely started. If and when money and foreign are available one can imagine Kurdistan being turned into a tourists' paradise for mountain climbing, game shooting,

[58 A]

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A Kurdish plough: as of old it is made from a forked tree, cut with one long limb and one short, to form a wooden hook. This is dragged through the ground by a pair of oxen. The ploughman welcomed the chance of showing off his child

[55 B]

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000 winter sports, a summer haven from the heat of the plains, and other things on which people spend their annual savings.

439 277 Tobacco is the only important export of Kurdistan. It has not been scientifically cultivated to such an extent that it can compete with sources outside Iraq. The government experimental farm near Sulaimaniya is, however, carrying out valuable research work in the improvement of Kurdish agriculture, especially the production of tobacco. At present Kurdish tobacco is bought, from the villagers who grow it, by 'stags' of merchants in the towns, and sent to factories in Baghdad to be made up into cigarettes. Owing to the low price at which they are offered Iraqi cigarettes find a ready sale throughout Iraq. But unfortunately little of the profits reach the grower.

245 Another potential source of revenue in Kurdistan is the fruit-growing industry, which so far has been quite neglected except for local consumption. When one leaves the lowlands and the motor roads, and rides on horseback along the narrow mountain tracks which the lowlander never sees, wide hillsides covered with grape-vines greet the eye, and in the valleys the water of gushing springs flows under the shade of leafy mulberry and walnut trees. Apples, pears, pomegranates, figs and other fruits are abundant with no scientific cultivation and much of them is wasted.

[273] Were Mohammedan prejudice overcome, and up-to-date machinery for producing wine installed in Sulaimaniya, an industry might be started which would one day rival that of France or the Rhine. I

554 181 have sometimes spoken with rich Kurdish aghas in their highland villages, whose wealth was only evident in their voluminous waistbands and large guest-houses with numbers of armed retainers waiting to do their bidding. When asked why

181 they do not develop their resources, a lack of imagination becomes apparent—"Our fathers grew tobacco, and we are manag-

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181 ing to live by doing the same, so why should we do more?" is the gist of most replies. Some say: "Why don't you English come and show us how to?" . . . Foreign undertakings are, however, not encouraged in Iraq.

186 The greatest difficulty to be overcome by the Kurds before they can take their place in the modern world is lack of education—that is, education in the broad sense as well as book-learning. The majority of Kurds have never seen Baghdad, and those who have find in it many things which disappoint them on coming down from the pure air of their snow-capped mountains.

Although the young Kurd who has been to school wants to improve himself and his race, his ambitions are stifled by members of the older generation who see in the advancement of civilization a loss of their own power; therefore they keep to the fore the old motto of "not being cleverer than

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186 your fathers". It was this fear of loss of power which frustrated any attempts at progress in Kurdistan during the period of 000 the British mandate over Iraq. The men who could have helped their race to become civilized—the chiefs or 'aristocracy' —have preferred to retain their temporary local power to the detriment of the advancement of their race. As has happened in nearly every country except England, when feudalism has ceased to be useful its leaders have sunk with their system rather than be the founders of a new democratic order.

There is little doubt that if education goes forward in conjunction with a raising of the standard of living, the highland Kurds will exercise an ever increasing influence on the progress of the young Iraqi state; just as the Scots in Great Britain, since the days of Queen Anne, have quietly introduced their fertile brains into every phase and calling of the national life.

[59 C]